



# MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS

*The bittersweet bond is explored  
by a young woman who has learned, at last, to recognize that  
anger is part of love. By Bette-Jane Raphael*

There was a time when my mother could do nothing right. I measured her against all of the fictional mothers I admired, and she invariably came out second best. Even the mothers of my friends seemed to offer better qualifications for parenting. Amy's mother was a talented artist. Sandy's wore beautiful clothes and never did her own laundry. Judy's dressed in interesting Mexican peasant blouses and was a well-educated teacher. All my own mother ever seemed to do was make good food and nag me when I ate too much of it. She got angry if I didn't do my homework. She wasn't brilliant and she wasn't stylish and she kept me from doing a lot of the things I wanted to do. I concluded she was responsible for everything that was wrong with my life. I loved her, but grudgingly.

And I wasn't alone. My disappointment with my mother was typical of the low estimation in which all my friends held their own mothers. Yet didn't my school chum Gail envy me my mother's banana bread? Didn't she come sniffing around our storm door on Thursdays like some deprived waif whose mother served up mud pies for dessert, instead of the bakery-bought delicacies that I knew for a fact were staples in her house (and for which I envied her)? Truly it was with our own mothers that, first and foremost, we experienced the truth of the adage: Familiarity breeds contempt.

It seems to me now, looking back, that our dissatisfaction was almost inevitable. Who could blame us for chafing at a relationship at once so strong, so immutable, so constant and yet so not of our own choosing? We were born into this connection, and though it was at first so necessary to our nurturing, it became, by its very nature, smothering. It seems only natural that we grew to resent our mothers' unrelenting presence (and they ours, for that matter). We were constantly having to do what they told us to do. (And, for their part, they were constantly having to take the responsibility for that guidance.) We learned early on that although we may choose not to be someone's friend, or spouse, or employee, we can never stop being our mother's daughter. No wonder we resented them, and they us.

Forgiving our mothers for not being the ideal creatures we so want them to be isn't easy. They are the first and foremost female relationship we daughters know; not only are we tied to them by the time we spend together as well as by blood, but we are endlessly compared to them. "Just like your mother" is a phrase rarely applied to sons, and applied to daughters the moment they are born. Mothers and daughters are supposed to reflect each other so snugly, that each is terrified by the other's imperfections. We can forgive those same (*continued on page 179*)

Painting by Mary Cassatt; courtesy of a private collection.

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failings in others, but our mother's failings are implicitly our own. We're scared, we're threatened, we're angry and we're disappointed because if they're not perfect, we're not perfect.

As if that weren't enough, another inescapable fact completes the built-in estrangement of mothers and daughters. Mothers today belong to an era different from that of their daughters, an era that invariably has different values. In preparing us for life, they tend to try and equip us with tools that no longer apply to the world as we see it. And, in our turn, we are bound, in one degree or another, to reject them as our role models. Our society is changing so fast, especially for women, that it's no wonder mothers and daughters are pulled apart. Bridging the gap, however, can be a wonderfully rewarding, growth-producing, healing achievement. It was for me.

Because, crippled or not by this "monstrous" woman, I grew up, went away to school and began to live on my own. I fell in love, held down jobs and used some therapy to help me learn about myself. And then one night when I was nearly 30 I went to my parents' house for dinner. It was something I had done dozens of times before, but on this occasion I met my father at his place of work, a small factory he owned at the time. It was a dreary barn of a place, located in an even drearier section of the city. The winter evening was chilly and damp, and we drove through depressing neighborhoods and barren stretches of highway for 45 minutes before we reached my parents' home in the suburbs. By the time we arrived we were hungry and cold. We hurried up the path to the house and my father put his key in the lock and pushed open the front door. And there was my mother coming toward us, the light and the warmth and aroma of the kitchen her backdrop. She was smiling and cheerful. In fact, the whole house had a welcoming quality of which she was the center—a quality that I had taken for granted all those years when I arrived home from school in the afternoon light of three o'clock. I was suddenly overcome with emotion. "This is what my father has always come home to," I said to myself. "This is what has made his life sweet. This is why he has said to me time and time again—words that had always annoyed me—'Your mother is a wonderful woman.'" Could it be, I wondered? Could it actually be that she *was*?

The experience was a turning point in my relationship with my mother. I began to see her not only in relationship to me, but as an individual with a relation-

ship to the rest of the world, a woman with shortcomings and strengths, a woman with some qualities I didn't like and others which delighted me. Her love of life, her fortitude, her ready sense of humor, her dedication to my well-being as she saw it, all finally were put into balance with those things that had always infuriated me. And I found I could easily love her for what she was, and forgive her for what she wasn't.

On reflecting about why and how much a basic change in outlook had become possible, I came to a rather startling conclusion. I had grown up. My mother hadn't changed—I had. I had found my own identity, one that excluded my mother to some extent—and so I could now allow her a separate identity. We were finally two different people. And, if that was the case, if she wasn't me and I wasn't she, then it was okay if she wasn't perfect.

I think my friend Stephanie has come to the same place with her mother. Stephanie is a freelance artist and she recently invested in a telephone answering machine, one of those awful things where you have to tape record a coherent message in about 30 seconds. Shortly after the machine was installed, Stephanie's mother telephoned.

Stephanie told me about that call. "My mother is well over sixty," she said. "She didn't even have a phone when she was a kid, let alone a machine to answer it. And yet I came home to find a message from her on the tape—and it was gorgeous. She said something like, 'Hi, Steph, this is your mother. Well, I guess you're not home.' She went on and on, and she ended with—and this is what really killed me—she ended with 'Bye, sweetie . . . I love you.' And she made a smacking noise like a kiss. I couldn't believe it. Even a lot of my contemporaries are uneasy with that machine. But my mother, this woman I had always condemned as old-fashioned, she was so together. I felt ashamed. Her spunk, it came over the wires like electricity. I realized how often she calls me, how she is always there for me. I played that tape over and over, tears streaming down my face. It was as if I were really hearing her for the first time in my life. Then I called her and told her how great I thought she was."

### Hardest adjustment

I'm happy for Stephanie, and I'm happy for myself. Because while coming to terms with our mothers may be the hardest adjustment women have to make, I'm convinced that if we don't make it, we never completely grow up. If we carry around the old angers, if we go on blaming our mothers for the things we don't like about ourselves and our lives, then we never take the responsibility for ourselves. And we're bound in the role of child-victim, a (*continued*)

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role we are destined to repeat with the rest of the people who become intimates in our lives.

Which isn't to say that even the most self-aware women won't carry around traces of their mothers—and their fathers, for that matter—that they wish they didn't have. A woman I used to work with once told me her mother had imbued her with a terrible distrust of men, a feeling she couldn't completely exorcise: "My mother always said to me, 'A man is only out for one thing.' It was,

I realize now, her way of trying to keep me chaste in an era that valued chastity above everything. It's taken me a long time, but I find I've finally forgiven her for the unintentional harm she did me."

Of course, I'm not simple enough to believe that mothers always act unselfishly. Mothers are human too, after all. There are certainly bitter women who take their disappointments out on their daughters, who compete with them, belittle them and—probably most common of all—try to keep their daughters tied to them. Usually this is not because they are evil, but because when they become mothers they bought our culture's mawkish about having to give up everything for their children. Selfless people, unfortunately, can be the most demanding

creatures on God's earth. Having given up their identity, they may very well want you—for whom they did it in the first place—to fill in. A mother who has nothing in her life but her children will be loath to give them up. This seems especially true for a daughter, because society traditionally approves of keeping a girl-child close to home.

Looking back, I can see that something of all this must have been what was going on between my childhood friend Sandy and her mother, a woman with a sour marriage and enough money to keep herself idle. One day, Sandy confided that her mother and father only stayed together for the sake of Sandy and Sandy's brother, a fact that had been gratuitously communicated to Sandy by her mother. But if that was the case, if Sandy's mother were so devoted to her, then why did she make fun of Sandy's underdeveloped chest and belittle her straight A report card? We were confused. How could we understand back then that Sandy's mother might have had a stake in keeping the growing girl unsure of herself and dependent on her mother? Now I think I do understand. I hope, wherever Sandy is, that she understands too.

### Toward freedom

Because understanding one's mother, and accepting her *as she is*, is the only way toward freedom for a daughter. Trying to make Mom into something she isn't is not only a futile task, it's an enslaving one. It demands all our energies, which we could be devoting to shaping our own lives. An old college friend told me recently about her sister's single-minded dedication to changing their mother. "It feels to me as if my sister's tugging at my mother's skirts," my friend said, "alternately nagging her to change and then rejecting her for not being able to. Now my sister has decided that she's not going to see my mother at all. But really, her anger keeps her as bound to the woman as ever."

Unfortunately, what my friend's sister could not accept is that even the most well-meaning, devoted mothers may not be equipped to provide the kind of nurturing a daughter craves. A cousin once confided to me that her mother never hugged her, never gave her the physical closeness that she badly wanted. My aunt is a bright woman and a dedicated mother, and she's given my cousin a lot. But what rankles in the daughter's heart is that her mother never touches her. And yet there are no guarantees that our mothers are going to have the same life priorities we do. And if we expect them to, and go around bemoaning the fact that they don't, overlooking all they may give us in full measure, then we are fools.

It seems to me that we must accept that there are things our *(continued)*

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mothers can give us and things they can't. Accepting our mothers' limitations enables us to do the same with other important people in our lives, and that's the only way we can get through life without constantly feeling angry and disappointed. For my part, I have found that the truly adult relationships I share have all come to full maturity since the time I realized that my mother and I were not symbiotically attached.

That includes my relationship with her. For once we look beneath the unreal image we have superimposed on our mothers, we can find the real people underneath—women with wisdom and ignorance, admirable qualities as well as infuriating ones, beauty and warmth as well as sternness and discipline.

Doing this is difficult, because many of us can't stop hearing and seeing our mothers the way we heard and saw them when we were children and they were our much-resented disciplinarians. My sister's close friend Andy told me this story: "I was sitting around moaning about the fact that the man I was seeing was going off on a backpacking expedition without me. My mother said that I would have to face the fact that that was the kind of man he was, that he would always need to put physical space between us, that it was his way of getting the emotional distance he seemed to need. I remember I looked at her incredulously, because what she said was so obvious, so simple and yet so wise. And I realized that I had always discounted her opinions simply because they were hers, simply because she was my mother."

While Andy and Stephanie and I have updated our relationships with our mothers, perhaps no one can totally re-

solve the mother/daughter dilemma. This became clear to me during a conversation I had recently with a woman sitting next to me on an airplane. She mentioned that she was going to visit her mother. "Oh," I said, "how do you get along with each other?" "Pretty well," she answered, "now. I think I know what I can get and what I can't get from my mother," she said, "but I still go through periods of wanting *more*. I basically trust and love my mother very much, but I know she could never understand a lot of what's important to me. I've accepted that our relationship is limited, but I still feel a certain sadness."

Maybe that's the way it must be. Maybe we will always want just a little more than the people we love can give us. Maybe that's especially true when it comes to our mothers, because we were led to expect that they would give us everything.

Nevertheless, I'm grateful that I've overcome, to a great extent, the irritation of what sometimes seems like a poorly planned human arrangement. My mother and I may not be best friends, but I now can see that she is my most loyal fan, my one-woman booster squad. She calls every day when I'm sick, she worries when I'm blue, she hates anyone who hurts me and she tells everyone who stands around long enough to listen how talented and beautiful I am. Yes, she still cuts out newspaper items about morals she feels might uplift me, tales about how smoking ages the skin and warnings about how birth control pills cause sagging behinds. But then, I can be pretty annoying myself.

And that's okay, too. Perhaps the most important reason that the acceptance of our mothers is so necessary to our lives is that, where mother acceptance flourishes, self-acceptance abounds. It's curious and delightful: accepting our mothers as they are enables us to do the same for ourselves. **End**

# Ralph Nader Reports

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taxpayers will have to pay for, along with staggering costs of trying to keep radioactive wastes safe, and guarding daily all aspects of nuclear technology.

The construction costs of nuclear power plants are at least 25 percent greater than the costs of building oil and coal facilities, and the gap is widening, according to economic analysts such as Professor Irwin Bupp of the Harvard Business School. Furthermore, the cost of nuclear fuel, uranium, is rapidly rising.

Other economic problems plague the industry. Nuclear plants show consistently lower output than coal plants. Several companies have asked the federal government to bail out their construction projects, guarantee their sales or assume their horrendous radioactive waste problems. Added to all this is the fact that the nuclear power industry does not create many jobs in its operation because its systems are highly automated. However, it does place a huge drain on the nation's capital supply.

6. Atomic energy is not necessary to meet our electricity demands. The short term (over the next 30 years at least) alternative that is cheapest, safest and most likely to create jobs is improved energy efficiency or conservation.

7. Because atomic power is vulnerable to sabotage and nuclear materials to theft, centralized political and police systems will be required. A few terrorists could bring a region to its knees. To reduce this risk, one utility already has asked that its state legislature give utility detectives the powers of public police. Clearly, our civil liberties and privacy could be eroded in order to safeguard atomic materials and installations.

8. The solar energy age is almost here. And our country is blessed with the fossil fuels and pollution-control technology necessary to gain time to make solar energy a viable alternative.

After long, private reflection, famed business professor and industrialist Georges Doriot summed up the case against atomic energy in eight words: "Nuclear power cannot be trusted to modern society." And a prominent New York cancer specialist phrases it more graphically: "Stopping nuclear power is a major cancer prevention program."

For more free documentation of the hazards of atomic energy, the superiority of alternative ways to meet energy needs and the names of citizen groups nearest you, write to Critical Mass, P. O. Box 1538, Washington, D.C. 20013. **End**

Interested in continuing the dialogue on nuclear power? Write Ralph Nader, c/o Ladies' Home Journal, 641 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022.



"He's emotionally unstable."